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There Is No Alternative to Day Schools

Opinion

By Irving Greenberg

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The day school movement is embattled. After significant growth over the past two decades, overall enrollment at non-Orthodox day schools has taken a slight downward turn in the past several years. Complaints that day-school education is just too expensive have surged. Leading philanthropists insist they get more bang for their buck from Birthright Israel, or from funding Jewish camping, than from offering more costly day school tuition assistance. Highly visible Hebrew charter schools have been started to provide a publicly funded alternative to day schools. And new programs have been launched to rehabilitate supplemental religious or Hebrew schools/Talmud Torahs, so they can serve as better educational options for parents.

I, too, wish there were a cheap, effective alternative to day schools — but there is not. Modern America is the most sophisticated, dynamic general civilization ever inhabited by Jews. Every way of life and value system is available to everyone, and they are often offered in highly attractive packages. Only when Judaism is experienced in a form as satisfying and fulfilling as these alternatives will Jews embrace their identity and tradition. And only day schools offer the tools to make a mature embrace of Judaism plausible for many of our young people. As the research demonstrates, a day school education makes its recipients much more likely than their peers who do not receive this form of education to choose to be active members of the Jewish people, committed to Jewish marriage and family life.

The non-Orthodox, who are more exposed socially and more integrated in American society, need day schools more than the Orthodox. Thus far, however, the Jewish community has not been serious enough about making day school education accessible and affordable to non-Orthodox populations — which is why their rates of assimilation are higher.

There is an alternative. Six months ago, the Jim Joseph Foundation committed a record-level \$11 million to five communities for scholarships and tuition subsidies for children attending Jewish day and high schools, early childhood school programs and Jewish residential camps. This historic gift is premised on the recognition that parents cannot pay the full costs of quality schools, just as public schools could not survive without the support of all taxpayers. (Nor, for that matter, could colleges and universities offer quality education funded by tuition alone.) Thanks to this gift, more kids are now able to attend or stay in day schools when their families could not otherwise afford it.

Thankfully, there are other organizations now taking up the challenge as well. The Legacy Heritage Fund has begun helping families at schools in small- and medium-sized communities in the United States. In New York, the UJA-Federation's Rose Biller Fund is distributing \$1 million in need-based scholarship money largely to high school and transfer students. And the Philadelphia-based Kohelet Foundation has begun disbursing tuition aid to area families. Similar local efforts are afoot in Milwaukee, Chicago and New Jersey.

These initiatives are spot on. It is time for heroic increases in support for Jewish education — with day schools at the head. I am not blind to the destructive impact of the economic crisis: The mood in Jewish philanthropy has shifted to retrenchment, not bold new initiatives. But assimilation will not wait until we recover our nerve. The next generation will be harder to reach than this one. The community must muster its will to live and step up to pay the price — whatever it costs — for the highest level of Jewish education for its young. The Jewish mega-foundations and our community federations — even with depleted resources — remain best positioned to help. They should raid their reserves and spend down for the next few years if necessary. This is like the cost of a war for survival.

Our immediate goal should be a massive increase in scholarship and tuition-subsidy money. There is little prospect of

American government vouchers comparable to the support offered by the British and Canadian governments to parochial schools. So our community must “self-tax,” with foundations, federations and individuals taking upon themselves the obligation to fund Jewish education at a level that would generate the hundreds of millions of dollars needed. The long-term goal should be a comprehensive, community-supported system of intensive formal and informal Jewish education. The Jewish future demands nothing less.

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